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DATA TRENDLINE

White Voter Preferences:
Predictable Trends

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DATA TRENDLINEWHITE VOTER PREFERENCES:
PREDICTABLE TRENDS

There is a certain pattern and consistency about trends in white voter support for the various parties over the past decade which poses interesting questions. Some equally interesting answers suggest themselves.

The firm Market and Opinion Surveys (Pty) Ltd has conducted strictly comparable polls among white voters since 1969 for *Rapport* and for the Centre for Applied Social Sciences. These polls of voter preference, once adjusted to apply to likely voters in contested constituencies, have always given results close to the outcome of elections.

In this Data Trendline the patterns of support are examined from November 1969 to July 1983 in order to explain some of the underlying dynamics of white politics in South Africa.

The National Party: The English-speaking Role

Figure I shows trends in Afrikaans-speaking, English-speaking and overall support for the National Party, as associated with certain major events in South African politics. A few aspects are quite clear.

The support for the party from English-speakers has tended to fluctuate more than the dominant Afrikaans-speaking support up to the 1982 split and the formation of the Conservative Party. English voter support for the NP would seem to drop away sharply when Nationalist politicians question loyalty or goodwill towards Afrikaans interests of English voters, as in 1972. However, the fluctuations are not erratic and more generally follow the same pattern of Afrikaans-speaking support. The English-speaking voters are not, as is often thought by some members of the NP, fickle "floating" voters.

English-speaking voters have twice "strengthened" the NP support base during times of flagging Afrikaans support - after the dip in support associated with the "information scandal" in 1979, and during the serious crisis of disunity in 1982; the problems associated with Dr. Andries Treurnicht.

The Party as Security Blanket

Looking at the broad trends shows that the NP fortunes are more affected by political issues than by economic cycles. The NP gathers its strongest support in times of political insecurity: note, for example, the recovery in popularity during the 1973-1975 period of high black strike activity. This factor was certainly not the only one operating, but cannot be discounted.

Of note also is the high point of support for the party during the massive "Soweto" and other township disturbances. Even the massive security clampdown on 18 black organisations in late 1977 did little to draw away English support, which reached its highest point ever in that year. Separate questions on the issue at the time of the polls, suggested that somewhat less than 10 percent of English-speaking voters drew away (or further away) from the NP during these events.

There may also be an indication in the results that Zimbabwean Independence boosted the fortunes of the NP among insecure white voters, and this is borne out by other research as well.¹⁾

The National Party in Difficulty

The "Information Scandal" and the events leading to the resignation of John Vorster, both from the Premiership and the State Presidency, certainly lowered the overall level of support. As said above, however, the English-speaking supporters rallied soon and stabilised the overall trend, with Zimbabwe probably figuring prominently in their motivations.

1) At that time 71% of the people polled saw South Africa's future as one of war, unrest and disruption.

The early stages of the planning for the new constitutional proposals did not cause any sagging of the NP's fortunes, but disunity in the party certainly did. The party's profile dropped badly during 1982. If it had not been for increased support among English-speakers, presumably in sympathy with Prime Minister Botha in his struggle with the right-wing, the overall support for the NP would have dropped below 40 percent of the electorate.

The drastic effects of the split in the party ranks appear to have been remarkably short-lived, however, and the party at this stage seems headed back towards its average level of support over the decade. ¹⁾

Patterns in the Opposition

The pattern in opposition support (Figure II), shows clearly the replacement of the United Party - New Republic Party formation as the major opposition by the Progressive-Reform and the Progressive-Federal formations. The PRP/PFP fortunes changed with the entry into the party of "non-traditional" liberals in 1975, with new constitutional proposals in 1977 which took account of ethnic interests, and with the election of Dr. F. van Zyl Slabbert as leader in 1980.

Its position as major opposition party now seems fairly secure, with the failure of the right-wing parties (which are not united, but simply combined in the graph) to sustain their 1980 - 1982 pattern of growth.

The Herstigte Nasionale Party, the National Conservative Party, and more recently the Conservative Party, as the right-wing or ultra-conservative formations, do not actually reflect a growth in ultra-conservatism (See *Indicator*, Sample Issue and Vol 1 No 1). It is a brand of voter inclination which has always been there, but has been "uncovered" by the growth in more pragmatic consciousness, both in the NP itself and in the opposition on the other side.

1) These trends are supported by two additional polls before July 1983 not reflected in the diagram for reasons of space.

See for example how the apparent growth of ultra-conservatism follows the growth of PFP support. As the electorate as a whole and the NP has moved to the "left", so the right-wing has become more visible.

The position of the CP, currently with some 12-13 percent of voter support on its own, is stronger than that support would suggest because of constituency delimitations in rural areas and a concentration of support in the Transvaal.

However, as previous analyses in *Indicator* have suggested, it has limited additional growth potential if one considers the pattern of voter attitudes, and it already appears to be in slow decline towards a figure of some 10 to 15 percent of the overall electorate.

The Implications

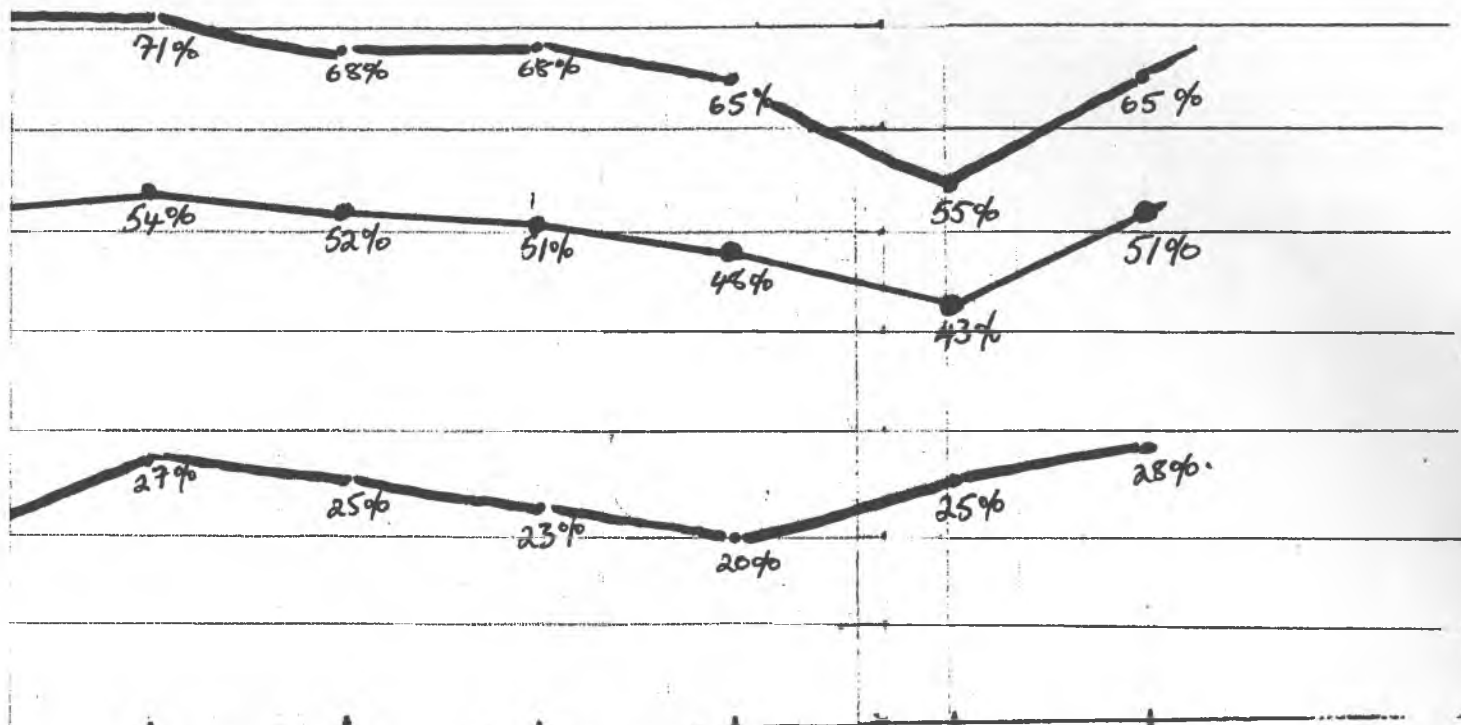
Patterns in South African electoral support are not particularly fluid. Generally the trends are slow and steady. The factors which cause shifts are generally complex, and the comments above have simply identified some salient factors among others.

The patterns would at least suggest a hypothesis, however. It would seem that unrest and disruptive pressures, within limits tend to cause a consolidation of white voter support around the party which is strongest in terms of numbers and image, the NP. Such consolidation is not ideological, but a reaction to political insecurity.

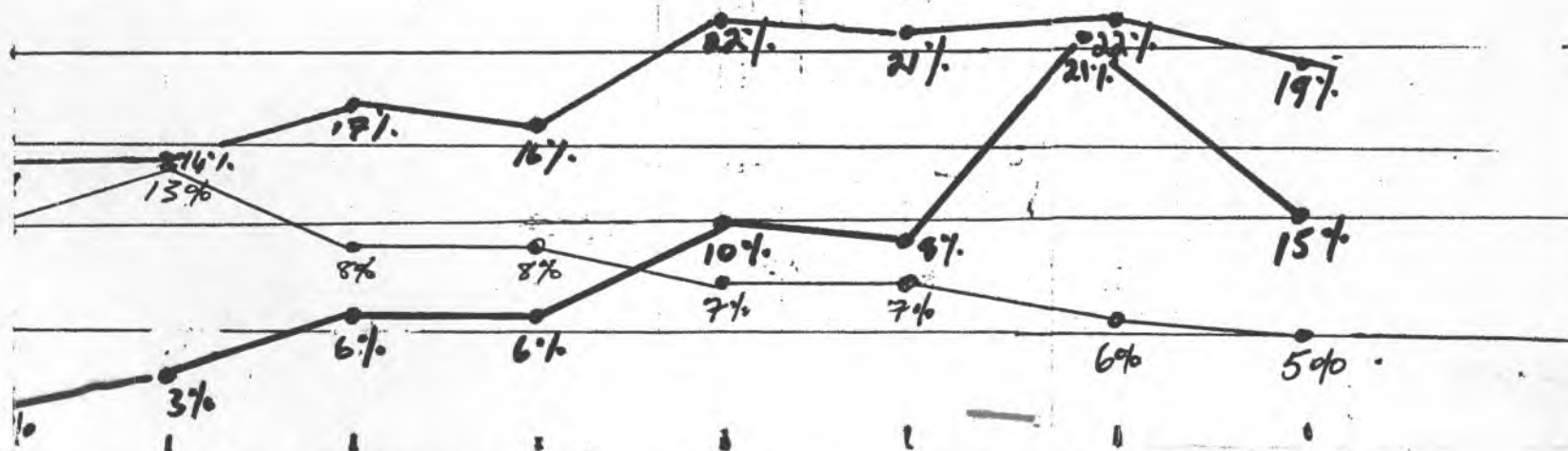
Opposition strength is fostered by internal problems in the dominant party, but not, it would appear, by external political pressures in the environment. If such pressures cause serious material costs for white voters the pattern may change. At this stage, however, the basic patterns established in the past decade-and-a-half seem to be holding.

1980-1983

1980-1983

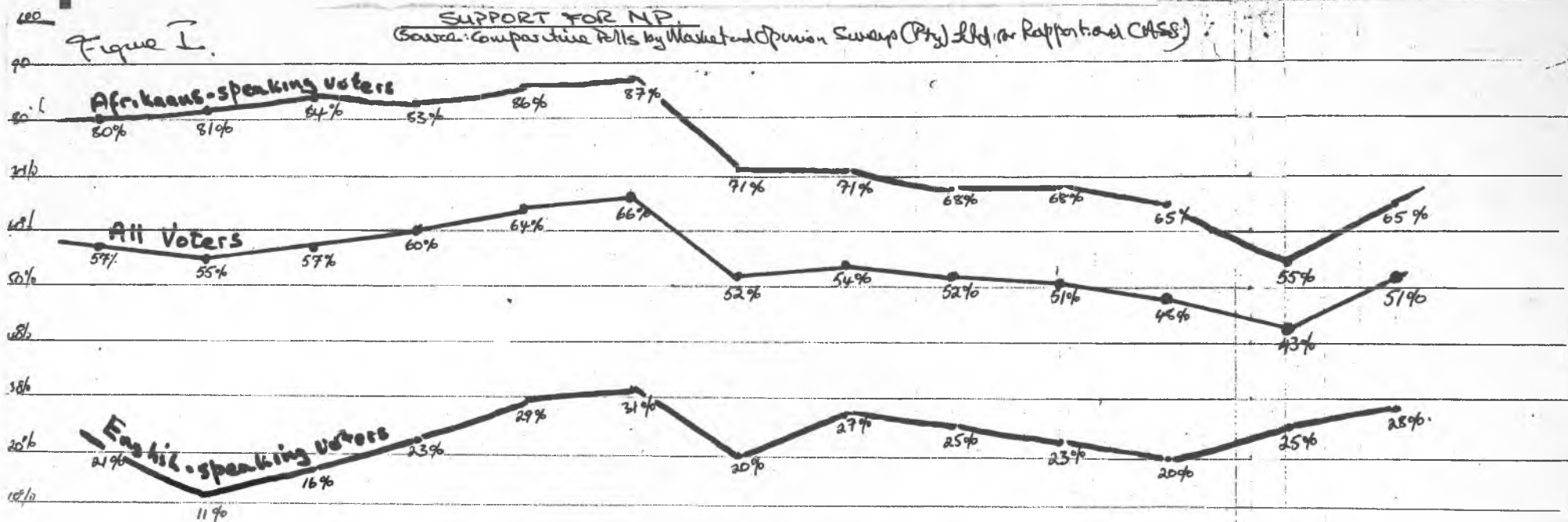


9	April 1980	Nov 1980	August 1981	Jan 1982	April 1982	July 1983
8	Slabbert elected leader, PFP. Zimbabwean Independence and Mugabe in power	Multi-racial Presidents' Council with blacks excluded. Growing disunity in National Party	after Feb 81 election, PFP more established. Continuing disunity in NP.	Divisions in NP reaching crisis point	After split in NP and establishment of CP in March 1982	Bill on new constitution tabled in parliament.



1977	June 1979	April 1980	Nov 1980	August 1981	Jan 1982	April 1982	July 1983
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July 1972
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August 1973
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ness unrest
in black
universities

August 1975
after
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ment of the
Progressive
Reform
Party

Sept 1976
Post June
1976 Soweto
riots

Oct 1977
After closing
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black news-
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burning of
18 black
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Sept 1977
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tional
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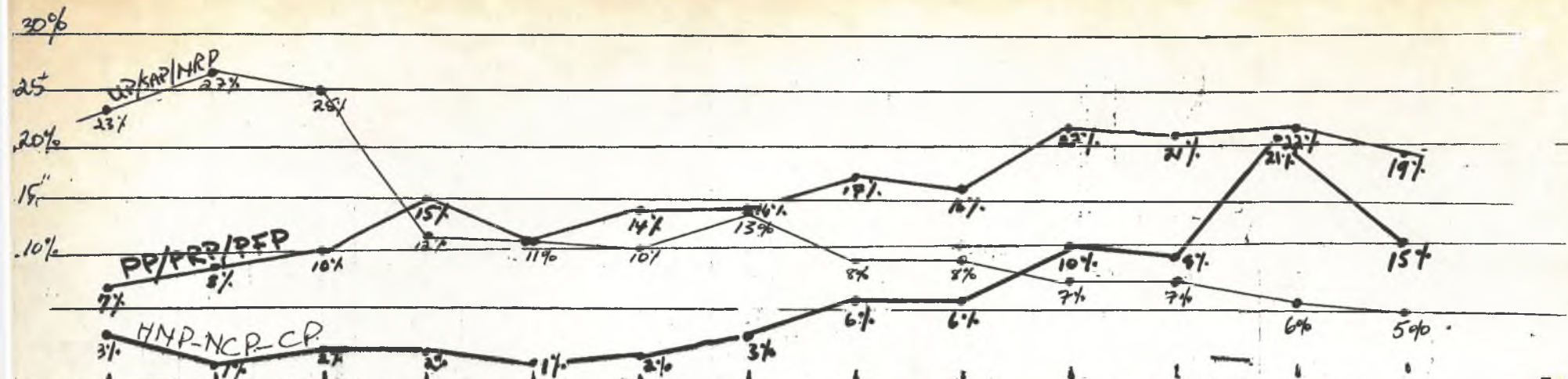
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Figure II.

(Source: Comparative PDI's by Market and Opinion Surveys (PDI) Ltd for Rapport and CASS.)



Nov 1969 just prior to 1980 general election

July 1972 Broederbond exposes and English-Afrikaans acrimony in parliament

August 1973 after mass black strikes and consciousness unrest in black universities

August 1975 after establishment of the Progressive Reform Party

Sept 1976 Post June 1976 Soweto riots

Oct 1977 After closing of two black newspapers and burning of 18 black organisations

June 1979 Late 1978 Information Scandal. Vorster Resignation and Botha Prime Minister

April 1980 Slabbert elected leader, PFP. Zimbabwean Independence and Mugabe in power

Nov 1980 Multi-racial Presidents' Council with blacks excluded. Growing disunity in National Party

August 1981 after Feb 81 election, PFP more established. Continuing disunity in NP.

Jan 1982 Divisions in NP reaching crisis point

April 1982 After split in NP and establishment of CP in March 1982

July 1983 Bill on new constitution tabled in parliament.



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